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ON THE EXTERMINATION OF THE GREAT NORTHERN SEA-COW (*RYTINA*).

A REPLY TO PROFESSOR A. E. NORDENSKIÖLD.

BY

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In an article in the *Ymer*,* for 1885 (pp. 246-267), and translated in this BULLETIN (1885, pp. 267-298), Professor Nordenskiöld, while replying to my remarks on certain points in his "Voyage of the Vega," by way of introduction complains of their "sharp tone." As but few of the readers of the BULLETIN may have had an opportunity to read the papers commented on, I may be permitted to make a few extracts. My letter to *Naturen*, written on Bering Island, commences as follows: "You will understand that only the most urgent necessity forces me to criticise the 'famous professor's account contained in his famous work'; but the longer I lived here [Bering Island], and the oftener I read his account comparing it with what I myself have ascertained on the spot, the more urgently I felt called upon to correct a great many of his statements. I was especially encouraged to do so by reflecting that the longer the errors remain undisputed, the firmer hold would they get on the public mind as indisputable, the more difficult it would later on become to rectify the er-

* The organ of the Swedish Society of Anthropology and Geography.

roneous impressions. Any one considering the fact, that statements made by travellers of little consequence may be found reiterated even in the latest publications, in spite of their having been refuted time and again, will understand how extremely difficult a task it will be to eradicate errors which originate from a book of such a circulation as Nordenskiöld's 'Voyage of the Vega,' and which are supported by a name of such authority as his." My article in the "Proceedings of the United States National Museum," for 1884, closes as follows: "That a scientist of Nordenskiöld's well-known thoroughness and merit could fall into those mistakes may, perhaps, be explained by the fact, that in the hurry of the short stay at the island he was too impatient to wait for the often protracted and indefinite answers, therefore indicating what replies he expected or wanted, a hint most certain to be followed by the natives. Besides, his account seems to have been written down, for the greater part from memory, the original notes having been either lost or insufficient."

So much for the tone, which—it seems to me—speaks for itself. I must also protest against Nordenskiöld characterizing my remarks as "violent attacks"* on his statements. I simply pointed out misunderstandings and corrected mistakes, and only in one instance have I taken the liberty to censure the learned professor, and that in terms the "tone" of which, after renewed consideration, I find to be very mild. But in regard to this very matter Professor Nordenskiöld, in his reply, intimates that it "may be dismissed," claiming, as he does, that in his "Voyage of the Vega," he made the necessary correction

* "Häftiga anfall"; in the translation rendered by "very strong charges."

in regard to the number of killed fur-seals, which in his first report he had erroneously given as 150 per centum larger than the number actually slaughtered. Now, what I censured was that, in the "Voyage," he did *not* unconditionally correct his erroneous statement, based on an "oral communication," when confronted with the official and indisputable figures. The slur and suspicion which he threw on these I marked as "indefensible." This expression, I repeat, is very mild, when I ought to have used the word "inexcusable." However, I am glad to learn that he has now admitted his blunder without reservation.

Professor Nordenskiöld passes lightly over a number of questions as "comparatively small matters"; for instance, the situation of the village of Bering Island, the color and number of the arctic foxes, and the extirpation of the sea-otter. Yet they are of special importance in connection with our discussion of the extermination of the sea-cow, demonstrating, as they do, that he made capital blunders in describing every one of the larger animals of the island, and that "the account does not—at least not always—rest on notes written down on the spot." Logically the question may be put thus: When it is seen that Nordenskiöld so thoroughly misunderstood the residents, in regard to animals which lived on the island in great numbers at the time of his visit, what assurance have we that the alleged statements in regard to the sea-cow (*Rytina gigas*) do not, in a similar manner, rest on mistakes and misunderstandings? And in this connection I may call attention to the fact, that Nordenskiöld, in his reply, has not attempted to deny that he was mistaken in all these statements. Only in regard to

the existence of the sea-cow after 1768 does he maintain his original position, reprinting what he said on the subject in the "Voyage," but without even attempting a refutation of my arguments, or demonstrations of his many mistakes in the details. Some general reflections, as to the method of examining "hunters," and his own long experience, etc., accompanied by the question, with what right I claim superiority for my examination, is all he puts forward to weaken my evidence. I shall now proceed to discuss these remarks in the order adopted by him.

Professor Nordenskiöld, at the outset, mentions that he examined the two men said to have seen a live sea-cow in 1854 separately, through an interpreter, "without any assistance from the authorities, who, as experience has taught me, *if present at such transactions, have only a bewildering and confusing influence on the natives.*" If Nordenskiöld by this sentence, and especially by italicizing it, intends to intimate that, on the occasion referred to, I had any assistance from the "authorities," then I will only say, that the implication is entirely without foundation: *I* did not need experience to teach me that with that kind of people one gets along better without the assistance of the "authorities." Let us then make a comparison between the conditions under which the two examinations—his and mine—were made. When Nordenskiöld made his inquiry, during his five days' stay, the unexpected arrival of the *Vega* expedition had naturally thrown the little village into an excitement approaching to fever heat. The regular steamer *Aleksander*, was there, too, and its presence alone is sufficient to upset the population. Nordenskiöld—the leader of

so great a concern—was himself an “authority,” and, besides, a complete stranger to the people. Moreover, he was in a hurry; indeed, during my sojourn at the island, I was assured that his mistakes were not to be wondered at, taking into consideration the haste with which every thing was done. My examination, on the other hand, took place under quite different circumstances. It was not made until later in the year, when every thing was quiet and peaceful on the island, at a time when its only “authority” was abroad; we had all plenty of time, and nobody was in a hurry; the questions were all well considered, and *committed to paper beforehand*, with the exception of one or two which were occasioned by the answers of the men; having lived on the island for nearly a year I had become well acquainted with the natives, with whom I was on the most friendly terms. Nobody with an unprejudiced mind will deny that my examination took place under circumstances more favorable than those attending Professor Nordenskiöld’s inquiry, and it will be seen, from what I have published at an earlier opportunity, that I was able to verify some of the statements through other witnesses, and also by the church records. Against Nordenskiöld’s reference to his general knowledge of examining “hunters,” gained by a twenty-five years’ experience, I may safely point to my one year’s personal and special knowledge of the two “hunters” here in question.

Inasmuch as the exact wording of the twenty questions I asked the men has been before the scientific public for about three years,* I consider it unnecessary for me to

* See “Proceedings U. S. National Museum,” 1884, pp. 181-189: Contributions to the History of the Commander Islands, No. 2, Investigations Relating to the Date of the Extermination of Steller’s Sea-Cow.

reply to Nordenskiöld's question: "Is Mr. Stejneger quite sure that his interrogations were better and more naturally put than mine?" The burden of proof rests with Professor Nordenskiöld. He, and everybody else, has had the opportunity of seeing what questions I asked, and how I asked them. But until he shall have produced his questions and demonstrated their superiority, I may, perhaps, be permitted to prefer mine.

I have nothing further to say in regard to this examination, the minutest details of which I placed before the public a long time ago. I shall not prolong this reply by reprinting them, and there is absolutely nothing to add: I have referred the case to the scientific world for judgment. It is only surprising, that *any one* who has read it can still retain a shadow of belief in the existence of a living sea-cow in 1854 (or 1846).

Professor Nordenskiöld's version of old Burdukovski's story is even less tenable. In my conversation with the latter, which took place under the same favorable circumstances as the other interrogatories, I began with having the part of the "Voyage of the Vega" relating to him translated word for word. At nearly every point he protested against the narrative as being incorrect, saying that he was at a loss to understand how Professor Nordenskiöld could have misunderstood him so completely. This will suffice in reply to the *reprint*, in the *Ymer*, and in this BULLETIN, of the paragraph in question, since a full refutation of it, as well as a complete and verbal rendering of Burdukovski's statements to me have been published in my article in the "Proceedings of the U. S. National Museum" already alluded to.

I may, however, be permitted to say a few words in re-

gard to Professor Nordenskiöld's characterizing my arguments for rejecting Burdukovski's testimony as "entirely artificial and arbitrary." * Twenty-five years' experience does not seem to have taught the professor to receive the stories of "hunters" with caution. Has he then never met with men of that class, who, knowing the impossibility of anybody present being capable of disproving them, would represent themselves (no matter for what reason) as eye-witnesses of some memorable event, the details of which they knew? The sole object of my "artificial and arbitrary" argumentation was to advocate caution, particularly since 107 years had passed from the time the older Burdukovski is said to have seen the last sea-cow killed, until his son retold the story to Professor Nordenskiöld. I advocated caution, because I knew, from personal acquaintance with these very people, that their memory in regard to time and events is utterly defective, and I maintain that their chronology and statements as to what took place, or was said, such a long time ago are *entirely* worthless, a good illustration of this being afforded by Merschenin, one of the witnesses, who could not state with any degree of certainty when he saw the alleged sea-cow—nay, was unable to give the precise age of his oldest son. I advocated caution, because Vosnessenski, the able and accomplished conservator of the St. Petersburg Academy, who visited Bering Island about the time when the older Burdukovski died; who was searching for, and found, parts of the skeleton of the sea-cow, and who was, no doubt, instructed

* The translator of Nordenskiöld's original article has evidently been at a loss to find an English word that would correctly render the Swedish word "advokatorisk." It means literally "a lawyer's (advocate's) argument," and *may* contain a slight implication of trickery. The above translation comes sufficiently close.

both by v. Baer and by Brandt to ascertain the fate of the animal;—I advocated caution, I say, because this traveller failed to report that a man had recently died, who in his youth had seen living sea-cows. In short, I considered then, and still consider, Burdukovski's story as too slightly founded to serve as the basis for a rejection of Sauer's *express* statement that the last sea-cow was killed in 1768.

Nordenskiöld endeavors to weaken Sauer's remark by intimating that Sauer *may* have written it down from memory, quoting him, as he does, in the following manner: "Sauer himself says in his preface, that he has had access to a copy of the ship's journal (where, of course, no remarks of the kind here in question were to be found), but that his notes, *otherwise*, were so very incomplete that he was *often* obliged to trust to his memory" (*italics mine*). This is certainly a very "*free*" version, to put it mildly. Sauer himself says, *verbatim*, as follows ("Account," etc., p. xii.): "During my travels, I was frequently necessitated to make notes on small pieces of paper—*those I have faithfully transcribed*; but *in some instances* I have been obliged to refer to memory"; and in the footnote on the next page: "My *narrative of the voyage* is taken from the journal written for Captain Billings, which I copied from the ship's journal" (*italics mine*). "*Some instances*" does not mean "*often*"! And as Sauer does not indicate his notice in regard to the extermination of the sea-cow as one of these few "*instances*," we may safely assume that in this case he was not obliged to trust to his memory. It is also worthy of note, that Sauer, when prevailed upon to join the expedition, made it an express condition, that he should have a right to

publish what notes he might make (p. ix. : "On receiving the promise of permission to publish my remarks, upon my return, I agreed"). He started, consequently, with the avowed intention of writing notes for later publication; his book was, therefore, no after-thought. Nordenskiöld furthermore asserts, that "to judge from the narrative of the voyage, Sauer himself seems not to have been on Bering Island, and the notice is given, by the way, without naming its source, and without any intimation from the author as to the importance that should be attributed to the statement." * This is, no doubt, in the main, correct, but there is, nevertheless, a possibility that we may be able to point out his source with a probability bordering on certainty. However, I may first mention, how it happened that Sauer, who was no professional naturalist, came to be interested in such questions. It must then be remembered that the expedition was sent out at the request of Pallas, the great Russian zoölogist, at a time when he was collecting material for his "*Zoögraphia Rosso-Asiatica*." A naturalist was to accompany the expedition, and Pallas himself wrote his instructions, but the man selected to fill the position lived in Irkutsk. Further, Sauer was a personal acquaintance of Pallas, who persuaded him to go. Nobody has doubted that Sauer was a very intelligent man, who travelled with his eyes and ears open. Is it, then, credible that Pallas, knowing that the expedition was to touch at Bering Island, if possible, † should have failed to direct Sauer to

* The last paragraph, as rendered in the BULLETIN, does not quite express Nordenskiöld's meaning, as written in the original, which may be translated more correctly as follows : "the notice is given . . . without the author having any idea of the importance which later on might be attributed to his statement."

† See the instructions to Capt. Billings, Art. x. ; "Account," etc., App., p. 39.

look into all the circumstances relating to the history of the sea-cow, the same Pallas who had induced Dmitri Bragin to keep a diary during his sojourn on Bering Island, in which Bragin enumerated all the animals found there, except the sea-cow.

It is of no consequence that Sauer had no opportunity to visit Bering Island personally. He travelled for several years in the neighboring regions, and for long intervals at a time he associated with men who had been living on that island, and whom he questioned in regard to the conditions there (see especially "Account," etc., pp. 281 and 306). In fact, it is plain from every page of his book that he was not afraid of asking questions whenever he was unable to obtain information otherwise.

If we now examine his account closely, we will find that his reason for mentioning the extermination of the sea-cow under the description of Kodiak (which commences as follows: "Here we made the following observations," p. 170) in all probability is due to his having received the information in regard to this event during his stay there. Under this supposition—and no explanation can be more natural—there is no room for doubt that his informant was Yefstrat Ivanitsch Delareff, then Schelikoff's agent at Kodiak. It is evident from several of Sauer's remarks that he placed implicit confidence in this man, and he mentions him in a number of instances as the one who gave him valuable information (see, for instance, pp. 171, 173, 174, and especially p. 197, on which he prints one of Delareff's statements *verbatim*.) That Sauer had ample time to question Mr. Delareff is certain, as he stayed at Kodiak two days longer than did Nordenskiöld at Bering Island, and, moreover, it appears

from the account, pp. 184–186, that Delareff accompanied Billings' expedition during the whole of the week following, viz., from July 6th to July 12th. It is, furthermore, an indisputable fact that Delareff wintered on Bering Island from August 10, 1781, to some time in the spring of 1782, consequently eight years before Sauer met him at Kodiak (see "Account," etc., p. 37). We have here a series of important facts which to the unprejudiced mind furnish a probable evidence of great strength to the effect that Sauer's statement is, by no means, a notice given "by the way," and without authority. There is no reason to doubt that Sauer fully understood the bearing of the statement, and we are, perhaps, permitted to assume that he did not enter into fuller details, since the extermination of the sea-cow was a fact so well known in the regions he visited, that he considered any further elaboration of the subject to be superfluous. That Sauer's account of the voyage was not *printed* until twelve years after the stay at Kodiak is, of course, quite immaterial. If, at the same time, we take into consideration that there is plenty of corroborative evidence—for instance, Bragin's list of Bering Island animals—I think I have shown Nordenskiöld's assertion that "there is no warrant whatever for the year 1768, so much written about," to be unqualifiedly wrong. He has in no way weakened the force of Sauer's express statement of the year 1768 being the year of extermination of the great northern sea-cow.

May I now be permitted to ask this question: If my doubt as to the correctness of the old "hunter's" chronology and statements in regard to what his father saw 107 years ago deserves the epithets "artificial and arbi-

trary," how, then, is Nordenskiöld's criticism of Sauer to be characterized? "Artificial and arbitrary"??

Little or nothing needs to be added,* for I have placed all the material I gathered before the public. I have done all in my power to enable my colleagues to form their own opinion: they need not take any one's word, either for or against. The case is pleaded and closed on my part, and I am quite willing to abide the verdict without further argument.

* Nordenskiöld sees fit to announce at the end of his reply to me that Malm described a fragment of a skull brought home from Bering Island by the *Vega* expedition as *Berardius vega*, but he ought to have informed his readers at the same time that the same species was described by me, the year before, as *Berardius bairdi*, from a perfect skull now in the U. S. National Museum ("Proc. U. S. Nat. Mus.," 1883, p. 75). He might also have added, that I discovered two other new species of ziphoid whales at Bering Island, one of which I described as *Ziphius grebnitskii* (*tom. cit.*, p. 75), while the other one received the name *Mesoplodon stejnegeri* TRUE (*op. cit.*, 1885, p. 584).